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C O N F I D E N T I A L VILNIUS 000038

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SUBJECT: VILNIUS QUIET AFTER LAST WEEK'S DEMONSTRATIONS

REF: A. VILNIUS 30
B. RIGA 29

Classified By: Ambassador John A. Cloud for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: Although political leaders condemned the violence at the January 16 anti-government demonstration outside the parliament building in Vilnius, they also said they had perhaps moved too quickly to implement austerity measures and said some could be reviewed or withdrawn. Police, who used tear gas and fired rubber bullets at protesters, defended their response to the violent demonstrators as measured and appropriate. An association of small-business owners has received permission to hold another large protest in two weeks, though they probably will not be allowed to do so in the same location. End summary.

¶2. (U) Dozens of broken windows await repair at the Seimas (parliament) building, drawing attention from occasional passersby, but little other evidence remains of the protest in front of the building on January 16. Police detained 151 persons at the demonstration, mostly for disorderly conduct or public drunkenness; 15 were still in custody on more serious charges as of January 21. More than a dozen lawyers, reportedly unhappy with recent government actions including increased taxes that will impact them personally, have stepped forward to provide pro bono representation. Officials estimated demonstration-related damage in Vilnius at 80,000 USD.

¶3. (U) PM Andrius Kubilius and a key coalition partner, Seimas Speaker Arunas Valinskas, admitted publicly over the weekend that the short time frame in which the GOL's economic-reform package was drafted and enacted might have prevented the government from seeking or hearing adequate input from the public. "We are ready to remove certain shortcomings in the decisions we took in December," Kubilius said. Indeed, he then said the GOL would look at ways to reduce the tax burden on small and medium businesses, even though the government faces a revenue shortfall of about 120 million USD due to the president's veto of a proposed tax on cars. Although opposition politicians have criticized the GOL for its economic plan, all parties condemned the violent protesters and no major party had endorsed or participated in the January 16 demonstration.

¶4. (C) Kestutis Lancinskas, the Vilnius district police chief and on-site commander during the demonstration, told us that he was generally pleased with the police response. This was the first time officers had ever used force against protesters since Lithuania regained its independence in 1991. He said that, in firing rubber bullets, officers had aimed to avoid heads and torsos and no serious injuries were reported. Lancinskas said it was clear that a large majority of the protesters were peaceful. In sharp contrast to that crowd of mostly pensioners, he said, was a smaller group of young men, whom he called disgruntled young men, bent on violence. The police chief said there was no evidence of

foreign involvement, but that many of the violent protesters were Russian-speaking Lithuanians. In all, about 500 police officers and 120 Ministry of Interior public-safety officers, who specialize in riot control, faced several thousand protesters, many of whom were throwing rocks, firing slingshots and tossing tear gas at the officers. Lancinskas said he ordered the officers to use nonlethal force in order to disperse the crowd more quickly since he knew reinforcements from other cities would not arrive quickly and he wanted to avoid the escalation of violence that had occurred in neighboring Latvia days earlier.

¶ 15. (C) Lancinskas said he had spoken with colleagues in Poland and elsewhere in order to draw on their experience so that he can plan for the next large demonstration in Vilnius expected on February 3. He hopes to meet with organizers of that protest beforehand, and is looking for options to screen participants as they arrive in order to identify and perhaps exclude potential troublemakers. Police also will warn non-participants to stay away from the area in case violence does ensue. The location for that protest has not been identified.

¶ 16. (U) Protests in other Lithuanian cities on January 16 passed without violence, although media reported January 21 that police in the port city of Klaipeda arrested two young men they said were attempting to carry smoke bombs to the site of an otherwise peaceful protest that drew up to 1,500 people in that city.

¶ 17. (C) Comment: The use of force by police and public-safety officers may well have prevented the violence of January 16 from becoming worse. However, there were some troubling aspects about the GOL response to this event. In advance of the protests, Interior Minister Palaitis made the decision to be out of the country to attend the January 16 EU Justice and Home Affairs informal ministerial despite the fact that protests in Riga had turned violent just a few days before. Defense Minister Rasa Jukneviciene told us January 20 that she had urged Palaitis not to travel but he told her that officials were not anticipating any violence. (Note: in Palaitis's absence, Jukneviciene became acting Interior Minister.) Jukneviciene told us that nearly 2000 rubber bullets were fired at a demonstration with a total participation of only 7000 people, of which, by many accounts, a relatively small number of protesters seemed interested in causing trouble. Asked to evaluate the performance of the police and security forces, Jukneviciene told us she thought they had "learned some lessons" from the incident. How well they have learned these lessons will likely be tested over the coming days and weeks.

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